

Dugald Butler, Mystic and Historian

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The short and simple annals of Dugald Butler's uneventful life can be briefly recounted.¹ He was born on 18th November 1862 in Glasgow, son of a father of the same name, and educated at Glasgow High School and University, graduating M.A. in 1883. He was licensed by the Presbytery of Dunoon in 1886. After serving as assistant to Rev. Dr. Kirk at New Kilpatrick, and to Rev. Dr. Matheson of St Bernard's, Edinburgh, he was called to the parish of Abernethy and ordained there on 23rd September 1890. There he ministered for 12 years. In 1902 he became minister of the Tron Kirk, Edinburgh, and five years later of Galashiels. Owing to a breakdown in health he retired in 1919; his latter years were spent in seclusion. He died on 9th January 1926. His wife Catherine, eldest daughter of Sir James Marwick, long Town Clerk of Glasgow, survived him into an extreme old age.

He apparently took little part in ecclesiastical affairs, and was well designated in the *Scotsman* obituary² as a "scholarly, devout and saintly man, of notable simplicity of character". It also notes his "broad sympathy with other denominations"; his truly ecumenical outlook is fully illustrated in his writings. Of his religion, mysticism is the other distinctive feature, as is also evinced in his works. His interest in history was at least in part the outcome of his "conservatism", his love of the old. He received the D.D. degree from Glasgow in 1907.

His works can be classified as historical, biographical and devotional, with some overlap. He had a great command of language, and his wide reading is reflected in numerous quotations. In the devotional category come *Eternal Elements in the Christian Faith* (1905), *Prayer in Experience* (1922) and *Jottings of an Invalid* (1924); the latter two were dictated to his wife and privately published. In the first mentioned, "eternal" is not contrasted with "ephemeral"; the substance of the book is better expressed in the preface as "a study of the Christ of history and of Christ in the spiritual experience of his disciples".³ Its basis is stated as that "man is by nature a religious being". The second part considers Christ as "the Son of God, as the Saviour, the Life and the

¹ *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, ed. H. Scott (1917 edition), ii, 180; *ibid.*, viii (1950) 150; *Glasgow Herald*, 11th January 1926.

² *Scotsman*, 11th January 1926.

³ Quotations throughout are taken from Butler's relevant works.

Inspirer of Men"; the third, "the experience of Christ through Repentance, Faith, Love and Prayer".

Intermediate may be classed three works relating to Archbishop Leighton, his most admired hero in Scottish Church History. He published in 1903 *The Life and Letters of Robert Leighton*", an elaborate volume of about 600 pages, edited with an introduction; *The Practice of the Presence of God* (1911); and delivered in St Giles' on 21st November 1911 a tercentenary lecture *Unity, Peace and Charity*. In the first of these he exhausts his large and varied vocabulary in praise. Leighton is hailed as "the great and saintly Scotsman, the seraphic doctor of the Scottish Church", and as a harbinger of ecumenicalism with his "vision of unity". With the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1909 in mind, he comments, "Had his advice been accepted, the Church would not be in the distracted condition of today". He regards him as having a "profoundly modern significance"; "he speaks to the need of a distracted time". He hopes that this may hasten the day of reconciliation. For him, Leighton "stands in strange contrast to his age, and appears as a star of peace amid the bitter controversies of his time", as one of the few champions of tolerance in the bigoted seventeenth century. His father Alexander suffered severe persecution under the regime of Laud, but was "never heard to speak of his persecutors save in terms of compassion and forgiveness". Butler holds that "Leighton's later action and life were not opposed to his father's views, as has been generally held. It was only the Laudian episcopate which Alexander opposed" in his *Zion's Plea Against Papacy* (1628), which was the occasion of his persecution. *The Practice of the Presence of God*, after a 50-page biographical introduction, comprises "Rules and Instructions for a Holy Life", "University Prayers", "Sermons Before the Scots Parliament" and a few shorter pieces. A recurrent theme is that Leighton "links a sober mysticism with the service of humanity. . . . The forms of institutional religion are absolutely necessary, but the mystical needs balance and calls for control".

Primarily biographical is a group giving short studies of religious leaders to whom he was attracted by their mystical elements. *John Wesley and George Whitefield in Scotland* (1898), *Henry Scougal and the Oxford Methodists* (1899), *Thomas à Kempis* (1908) and *George Fox in Scotland* (1913). To these may be added his short lives of *St Cuthbert* (1913) and *St Giles* (1914), in the paperback "Iona" series. These opuscula contain nothing novel. The former draws largely on the Venerable Bede. St Giles had been fully treated in Dr Cameron Lees's volume of 1889.⁴ There is more of himself in *Thomas à Kempis* (1908) for which he undertook research in the British Museum. Butler is not uncritical: "his book is characterised by quietism and too little by

⁴ J. C. Lees, *St Giles', Edinburgh* (Edinburgh 1889).

the enthusiasm of humanity"; the Reformation "concluded and transcended all that was good in medieval mysticism by giving it higher expression". The study of Wesley and Whitefield is primarily concerned with "the influence of Oxford Methodists on Scottish religion"; "an outstanding feature of the Methodist revival is that its wide influence was as important as its direct". Their letters and journals are the chief original source. Whitefield's indebtedness to Henry Scougal is emphasised, "the movement of which they were the outstanding leaders became to a considerable extent a movement *within* the Scottish Church". *Henry Scougal*, sub-titled "The Influence of a Religious Teacher on the Scottish Church", followed next year (1899). It resulted from his study of the Methodist movement, which impressed him with the "influence that Scougal had over its leaders during their formative period". This led him to discover that when Scougal was a Regent of King's College, Aberdeen, he was president of a society guided by much the same aim as the early Methodist Society at Oxford. His writings, which Butler also studied in the British Museum, "are eminently autobiographical, and reveal the growth of a saintly soul", especially his *Life of God in the Soul of Man*. The booklet of about 150 pages narrates the biography of the theologian whose life was divided between King's College, Aberdeen, and the parish of Auchterless, Aberdeenshire. He is compared to à Kempis, and to Leighton, "his spiritual teacher and close friend", like whom, "while on earth he lived in heaven, and brought the atmosphere of heaven nearer earth . . . from the strife of the period his soul was as a star and dwelt apart".

The third of the trilogy, *George Fox in Scotland*, was an expansion of lectures given on the 275th anniversary of the Tron Kirk in March 1912. He affirms that "the central truth of the Inner Light is coming to the front in religion. . . . A higher synthesis between Friends and the Church is called for, and they have a noble note to contribute to the symphony. Mysticism is embedded in all religion, and it is the glory of the Friends that they organised it in a group, which has been a religious and a social force". The book begins with an account of the contemporary religious situation in Scotland, and pays tribute to Cromwell as a "mighty religious influence" whose strength in religion arose from the fact that it was a personal experience. The major part of the small book is devoted to a consideration of the "spiritual significance of the Society of Friends". Fox was "not only a great religious visionary, but a great religious creator"; like à Kempis, a positive mystic of the Christian type; he discovered through experience the secret of the Apostolic Age, and found that it was being relived in him". Hence the opposition of the contemporary Puritan, who believed that "revelation was limited to the past". He concludes that the "positive mysticism of the Society" has

made them a social force, and "given them a power in the world . . . far beyond the limits of their communion".

Of Butler's primarily historical works, his first was *The Ancient Church and Parish of Abernethy* (1897), a detailed narrative of a locality whose greatest renown was in the early Christian period. It is erudite rather than original, derived largely from Cosmo Innes and Joseph Anderson, but supplemented from local records. Butler's translation to the Tron Kirk, Edinburgh, was followed by the appearance in 1906 of a large volume on that church, also known as "Christ's Kirk at the Tron". The south-east or Tron parish was created in 1584, and its congregation worshipped in St Giles' until the erection of the present building (1637-63). The church derived its name from the "tron" or "public beam for weighing merchandise", a centre of trade in the Old Town. Its eastern portion was removed in the 1780s to make way for the South Bridge; it suffered severely in the great fire of 1824. A detailed chronicle is provided by extracts from the City Records: a list of ministers and of prominent members, with brief biographies, is supplied. The former include two University Principals and several Moderators; the latter, two Lord Provosts and the eighteenth-century legal luminaries, Monboddo, Hailes and Braxfield. His third parish was commemorated only in the slight booklet *Lindean and Galashiels* (1915), first delivered as a lecture at the centenary of Galashiels Parish Church, 20th December 1914.

Two works of more general character are *Scottish Cathedrals and Abbeys* (1901), in the Guild Library published by the Church of Scotland; and *Gothic Architecture: Its Christian Origin and Inspiration* (1910); the "result of his study of Gothic for the former", which professes to "illustrate the idea that the history of the Scottish Church . . . is the history of the ideality and faith of the Scottish people". It draws on Maegibbon and Ross's *Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland*. The introduction, by Principal R. H. Story, calls it "the record of Scottish ecclesiastical history which is engraved in their ecclesiastical architecture". Butler deplores "the dilapidation and desecration of our ancient fanes", but absolves Knox and his co-reformers; the blame belongs to the "rascal multitude" and to the rapacious laymen "who were served heirs to the properties of the despoiled Church". He commences by discussing the relation of the Celtic to the Catholic Church; the latter "placed the Church upon a territorial rather than a tribal basis . . . introduced the orders of the Church of Rome and founded great monasteries . . . and absorbed the Culdees or Columban clergy into the Roman system". There follows a "sketch of Scottish Architecture", distinguishing five periods; a compendious chapter is devoted to the several dioceses and their cathedrals. Shorter accounts are given of collegiate and parish churches. Monastic remains are fully

dealt with. The book concludes with a summary description of surviving medieval architecture. It is primarily a work of reference.

Gothic Architecture is difficult to place. The author first considers "Christianity in its Relationship to Art", then "The Historical Development of Gothic Architecture". The kernel is comprised in Chapter III, "Gothic Architecture and the Christian Conceptions Under Which it Was Evolved", constituting one-third of the book. He maintains that "architecture of the Gothic type is to be equated with the Christian religion, and to be understood as an endeavour to express its spirit". "In the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries Europe seems to have aroused itself from a long slumber, and under the inspiration of religion to have clothed itself in the white garments of the Church." This interpretation he develops with regard to monasticism, pilgrimages, the Crusades, the "representative figures of Gregory VII and Bernard of Clairvaux, the development of ecclesiastical law and of scholasticism", and concludes that "the architects were in the service of the Church . . . and interpreted its message to the age". "Spire and pinnacle are the new elements . . . the vigour of faith found a new expression and symbol in stone," suitable to the inner spirit of heavenward soaring and spiritual uplift. . . . "Architecture was the first of the arts to yield to the new piety." The book contains much reference to the "Gothic spirit" in other forms of art — e.g. Giotto and Fra Angelico. "Each Order vied with the other in erecting beautiful churches; each diocese must have a cathedral worthy of its past and present. . . . The great stone books of the thirteenth century express its religion, and the keenness of it is best understood by the amount, quality and diversity of the architectural structures" — e.g. the cathedrals of St Andrews, Dunblane and Elgin in Scotland; Chartres, Amiens and Ste. Chapelle in France. "The Gothic temple suggests the heavenly, recalls the unseen Presence, and awes by the richness of its symbolism." "These cathedrals came from what was true in medieval religion, from its mysticism, its ideality, its piety and its living faith." He concludes by considering "Gothic as an Adjunct to Worship in the Light of Recent Religious Movements, Evangelical, Tractarian, Liberal", "united in the one conception, that of the Church, Holy Catholic and Apostolic, founded by our Lord and grounded upon the faith once delivered unto the saints". "Gothic, which is the inheritance of the Church Catholic, is not Roman but universal in the fullest sense of the term, and the national Churches — Scotland no longer behind — are more and more claiming the fulness of their inheritance, and venerating the old temples as never before."

